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SUBJECT: MIDDLE EAST: Radical States Orchestrate
Anti-American Consensus

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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

23 January 1986

MIDDLE EAST: Radical States Orchestrate
Anti-American ConsensusSummary

Despite sharply increased tensions among Libya, Syria, and Iran over the past year, these radical states are coordinating a successful anti-American diplomatic strategy in inter-Arab and Islamic fora. Libya received active support from Syria in shifting the focus of attention from terrorism to condemnation of the United States during the recent Arab League meeting in Tunis. At the Islamic Conference session in Fez that followed, Iran joined Syria in advancing pro-Libyan resolutions condemning the United States. []

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The radicals' success in shaping the Arab "consensus" on the Rome and Vienna terrorist attacks resulted at least in part from the unwillingness of the moderates to take a stand for an alternative view. Senior officials in most of the Arab states have expressed [] their distaste for Qadhafi and their personal sympathy for the US position, but, with few exceptions, none were ready to buck the radical states. []

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This memorandum was prepared by [] the Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 23 January 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, []

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There are limits to the radicals' ability to manipulate the Arab consensus--several moderate states are dragging their feet in response to Libya's call for Arab counter-sanctions, for example--but their efforts contribute to paralysis in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict and to the persistence of an atmosphere tolerant of terrorism and attacks on US personnel and facilities. The institutions involved play an important legitimating role in Arab politics and policymaking.

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The radical states coordinated strategies at the January meetings of the Arab League and Islamic Conference despite a year of unprecedented strains in their relations. Fighting in Beirut's refugee camps in May and June 1985 between the Syrian-backed Shia Amal organization and Palestinians heightened friction in Syrian relations with Libya

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Libyan officials were several times recalled from Damascus after policy wrangles. Iran's relations with Syria, strained over conflicting strategy in Lebanon and Syrian non-payment of its oil bill, deteriorated to the point that Tehran cut off oil deliveries for several months in the fall. Libya's flirtation with an opening to Baghdad strained Iranian-Libyan ties.

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Common interests and common opposition to US policies in the region work in favor of cooperation among the three states despite their differences. The Syrians privately dismiss Libyan leader Qadhafi as an undisciplined nuisance, according to the US Embassy in Damascus, but Syrian support for numerous Palestinian groups and Lebanese surrogates as well as its large arms purchases from the Soviets require resources far in excess of what the Syrians could come up with without Libyan largesse. Iran looks to Syria and Libya to assist in the supply of arms and to head off the prospect of united Arab hostility in the Gulf war. Qadhafi turns to Damascus to provide a geographical base for his support of a Palestinian campaign against Israel, and to both Syria and Iran to ease Libyan isolation and keep moderate states off balance.

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Syria, Libya, and Iran have attempted since early 1983 to supplement their bilateral cooperation by reviving a radical "front." Meetings of senior officials of the three states have taken place at six-month to one-year intervals; the most recent session occurred in Libya in late December 1985. Although the radicals have pledged themselves rhetorically to sweeping

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the agenda for specific, coordinated action has focused on a common diplomatic strategy for Arab League, Islamic Conference, Non-Aligned Movement, and UN meetings.

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During the past month, the radicals successfully added pro-Libyan and anti-American agenda items at the Arab League Council session and poisoned the atmosphere of the Islamic Conference meeting, according to reports from our Embassies in Tunis and Rabat. The League resolution supporting Libya was a largely pro-forma show of solidarity with a member state, in the view of one League official, but radical attempts to dominate emerged clearly at the Islamic Conference meetings.

--At the Islamic Conference preparatory sessions, Iran, Syria, and Libya again pressed Egypt to break relations with Israel in a debate that degenerated into a shouting match between the Syrian and Egyptian representatives.

--Libya and Syria entered reservations on a political committee resolution calling for withdrawal of "foreign troops" from Afghanistan.

--Libya's strident insistence on a statement of support resulted in two plenary resolutions affirming solidarity with Libya, condemning the measures taken by the US, and calling on Islamic nations to take "appropriate action" to counter "these oppressive economic measures," according to the Embassy.

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Moderate Response

In the aftermath of the Rome and Vienna attacks, senior government officials in most of the Arab states expressed distrust for Qadhafi and abhorrence of terrorism, yet none publicly challenged the consensus resolutions in support of Libya. In discussions with US Embassy officers, most Arab officials pleaded the necessity of expressing solidarity with a fellow Arab or Third World state threatened from "outside;" many criticized Washington for taking action that allowed Qadhafi to play the role of victim; some lectured the United States on the special responsibilities of a superpower to show restraint and break the "cycle of violence."

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Some Arab leaders saw a conflict between specific interests and taking a stand against the radical-sponsored "consensus":

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--Iraq's overwhelming priority is to maximize Arab support for its war effort in the Gulf. Our Embassy noted that Baghdad would not take a leading or visible role against Qadhafi despite its strained relations with Libya.

--The Algerians sought to avoid undermining their ability to serve as interlocutors and intermediaries for a disparate group of radicals in the region and could therefore be expected to take a reserved position on terrorism. In addition, Algiers probably hoped to avoid closing the door entirely on a dialogue with Qadhafi.

--Kuwait responded querulously to the freeze on Libyan assets in the United States because the action reminded Kuwaitis of the vulnerability of their own substantial foreign investments to similar action.

--Egypt, which has more reason than most states in the region to wish Qadhafi ill, ultimately closed ranks with the consensus in an effort to avoid impeding progress toward restoration of its standing in Arab ranks.

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Some Arab leaders simply elected to keep their heads down.

--The Saudis, [redacted] took no visible role in the Arab League ministerial meeting in Tunis, gave minimal press coverage to President Reagan's news conference, and indicated an overriding interest in keeping the matter of US sanctions--or of Saudi investments--from becoming a subject of public concern.

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Moderate friends of the United States in the region professed varying degrees of helplessness in the face of radical determination and the moderates' paralysis.

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--The Jordanians led an effort to moderate the language of the resolutions but conceded failure as a result of the silence on the part of the majority of the members.

--Moroccan officials likewise claimed to have done what they could to soften the language, but said that as a Mediterranean and Islamic state Morocco was compelled to go along.

--Sudanese [redacted]

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Reflecting their own hope of moderating Libyan behavior, the Sudanese argued that expanding the moderates' ties with Libya might have a positive impact on Qadhafi's actions. [redacted]

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Symptomatic of the disarray among the moderates was the extent of the finger-pointing and dismay in retrospective accounts of the Islamic Conference meetings. The Jordanians blamed the Moroccans for pushing the Libyan resolutions forward; the Tunisians blamed the African states, claiming that their going along demonstrated the extent of Libyan influence over them; and the Africans, in turn, expressed frustration that issues of concern to them-- such as drought or Islamic aid--were once again crowded off the agenda by purely Middle Eastern concerns. [redacted]

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Implications for the United States

In the absence of strong moderate leadership at the Tunis and Fez meetings, the radical states successfully used an appeal to "Arab unity" to pass pro-Libyan and anti-American resolutions. The call for Arab unity or consensus has strong popular appeal in the Middle East because it draws together the Islamic ideal of the unified community and longstanding popular resentment of domination of the Arabs by outside powers. The pusillanimous moderate states go along with radical-sponsored resolutions rather than risk domestic political opposition or regional isolation. [redacted]

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There are limits to the radicals' capability to manipulate the Arab consensus, however. The Libyan call for Arab counter-sanctions against the United States, for example, threatened the economic interests of enough Arab states to result in a decision to delay. Moreover, paralysis in regional institutions simply diverts diplomatic activity into less formal bilateral and multilateral channels. In cases of conflict between moderates and radicals where vital national interests are at stake on both sides, the issue of "consensus" simply evaporates,

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Arab League meetings are postponed, and Arab leaders revert to longstanding, ritual formulations. [REDACTED]

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Nevertheless, the radicals' active and coordinated strategy in inter-Arab and Islamic fora has significant implications for US interests in the region.

--These institutions play an important legitimating role in Arab policymaking. Strong moderate leadership in the Arab League or the Islamic Conference can advance the Arab position on issues such as resolving the conflict with Israel, as in the case of the 1982 Fez peace plan. The radicals' influence--such as Syria's opposition the King Hussein at the Casablanca Arab League meeting in August 1985--on the other hand, contributes to paralysis.

--Anti-American rhetoric articulated by the Arab League and in the Islamic Conference reinforces popular antipathy to the United States, forcing moderates further onto the defensive and creating an atmosphere more tolerant of terrorist activity and of state support for terrorist activity. [REDACTED]

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In the current crisis, Qadhafi has used the "support" he has won in Arab and Islamic fora to rebut the US contention that he is isolated.

--Qadhafi has pointed to Arab and Islamic support to buttress his eroding domestic position and to pose as the inheritor of Nasir's role as leader of the Arabs.

--He also has contrasted his own success in winning Arab and Islamic support with US "failure" to win European support for sanctions to claim a diplomatic "victory." [REDACTED]

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